

Poverty May 2009

Volume 1, Issue 5

## Poverty Defined

In a nutshell, poverty is the state of being unable to get what you “need.” But the “needs” of a person do in fact differ from place to place and person to person. Hence, the issue of poverty finds itself split into two different categories: absolute poverty and relative poverty. The term *absolute poverty* is used to define the situation when a person lacks the bare essentials for life (like food, clean water, shelter and so on). *Relative poverty*, is used to define the circumstances when a person cannot fully participate in what is normal for the society in which they live, due to a lack of money.



Yet, poverty is not a word that we need to look up in a dictionary to know what it means. In places like the U.S. where success is largely measured in monetary terms, it is a word that makes the majority of us feel uncomfortable and afraid; afraid that such a situation even exists. We feel this fear when we see the face of poverty in commercials on television and we quickly change the channel. We feel it when we see its face at a busy street intersection holding a little cardboard sign as we do our best to ignore it until the light turns green. Yes, most of us have seen the face of hunger, homelessness, and hopelessness and still live in denial. But the truth is that poverty DOES exist, and not just in distant developing countries as many would like to think. Indeed, poverty is global issue that affects children as well as the elderly, small countries and large countries, weak nations and mighty ones; it is not partial. Poverty does not care about your race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

### Sources:

Picture of children taken from: [http://www.freewebs.com/khalid\\_moustache\\_man/](http://www.freewebs.com/khalid_moustache_man/)

Picture of man with sign taken from: [http://cache.gettyimages.com/xc/2546290.jpg?](http://cache.gettyimages.com/xc/2546290.jpg?v=1&c=ViewImages&k=2&d=17A4AD9FDB9CF1934A2752006EF5F0ED54FA28F530C677DA5A5397277B4DC33E)

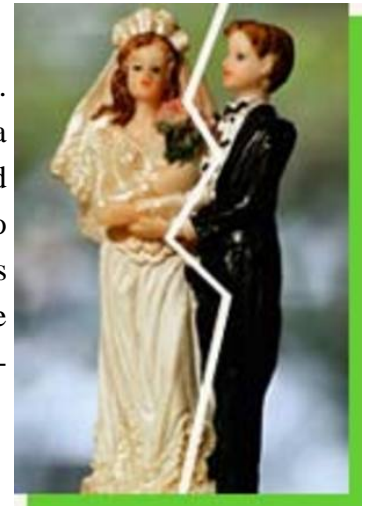
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## Causes of Poverty in the U.S.

The causes of poverty can be very controversial. Some say that “the system” or how society functions as a whole is to blame while others blame poor cultural habits. And when it comes down to it, the causes of poverty are so complex, that they are actually in part, both.

### Family Issues

One of the main contributors to poverty is the disintegration of the family structure. With divorce rates and teen pregnancies at an all time high, the typical family of a father, mother and 2.5 kids is practically non-existent. When, families are headed by a single parent, that not only means one person taking on double roles, it also means a single income. And that single income becomes even smaller when it is earned by a single mother, due to gaps between male and female wages and the types of jobs available to women. So, it does not come as a surprise that married-couple families are significantly less poor than female-headed households.<sup>1</sup>



### Low Wages

While unemployment definitely plays its part in causing poverty, there is another economic problem that does more damage than that.<sup>1</sup> The cost of living keeps increasing and yet wages are holding steady (unless you're a CEO). Millions of people have fallen into a classification known as the “working poor.” These are the people who get stuck trying to survive the unpredictability of life on minimum wage. People like Delores Ellis; a 51-year-old woman whose highest earned salary is \$6.50 an hour, with no health insurance or pension.<sup>1</sup> Like many others, Delores spent most of her life not unemployed. She has been hard at work but has nothing to show for it.

“In 1965, CEOs made 24 times as much as the average worker; by 2003, they earned 185 times as much<sup>1</sup>.”

### Cultural Habits

Because material possessions are highly prized in the U.S., the majority of Americans tend to spend more than they can actually afford. The poor are not immune to this trend. This is especially damaging for those living in poverty, because for those who live in poverty, the second television set and the washer and dryer are not simply luxuries taken for granted, they are the only assets that they own. The poor tend not to have bank accounts, they do not have a cushion to fall back on.<sup>1</sup> So, while financially stable Americans who get a little too excited on payday can always rely on savings, the poor are left only to dig their grave deeper.

### Isolation

While racial segregation is no longer mandated by law, it still exists. As people choose to where to live, most communities have neighborhoods that became easily identifiable as “White” or “Black” parts of town to a driver foreign to the area. This phenomenon may seem harmless, but thanks to it public schools are still almost totally segregated...Blacks and Whites increasingly go to school with more integrated Hispanics, but not with each other.<sup>1</sup>

“Only 5 to 10 percent of American families live in stable, integrated communities<sup>1</sup>.”

## Effects of Poverty

So, we know what some of the causes of poverty are, but what are its effects? The effects of poverty are many, but several fall into two main categories.

### Education

Poverty affects education in a number of ways. Children who grow up in poverty have less access to adequate healthcare, and illness can lead to excess absences from school. Also, poor children are much more likely to suffer from hunger, fatigue, irritability, headaches, ear infections, and colds which are all conditions that have the ability to interfere with a child's attention span, focus and concentration.<sup>1</sup> These impacts are felt most by impoverished children in primary school. Their chances do not improve as they get older. Impoverished children are also at greater risk for developing problems with the law and have higher levels of teenage pregnancy. So, their likelihood of finishing high school and attending college are very low.

### Health

First, there is the physical health aspect. When those who live in poverty are ill, they do not or cannot visit a physician until they feel that it is absolutely necessary. This mentality often leads to simple health problems becoming much more serious by the time a physician is sought and thus, creates a much bigger bill. Poverty has also been linked to obesity, because healthy foods are more expensive than the food on the dollar menu at McDonald's.

For those who live in absolute poverty, lack of access to food leads to hunger, malnutrition and even to starvation. Also, not having access to clean water can lead to diseases, diarrheal infections and even death.

Mental health is also affected as stress and depression can easily set in, in times of desperation.

#### Sources:

- 1) Solley, Bobbie A. (2005). *When Poverty's Children Write: Celebrating Strengths, Transforming Lives*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, Inc.
- 2) UNICEF's "2007 Child Survival and Development" press release
- 3) Anup Shah, *Poverty Facts and Stats*, <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>. Last updated: Sunday, March 22, 2009

### Did you know...

Every year, 9.2 million children under the age of five die from poverty (that's more than 26,000 children per day, and 1 child every 3.3 seconds).<sup>2</sup>

Nearly 1 billion people entered the 21st century unable to read a book or sign their names due to poverty.<sup>3</sup>

Less than 1% of what the world spent every year on weapons was needed to put every child into school by the year 2000 and yet it didn't happen.<sup>3</sup>

1.4 million children under the age of 5 die each year from lack of access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation.<sup>3</sup>

Half of all children in the world live in poverty.<sup>3</sup>

For less than the amount of money that Europe spends each year on cigarettes, all developing countries can establish basic education for all, water and sanitation for all, reproductive health for all women and have basic health and nutrition for all.<sup>3</sup>